

Healthy Homes Strategy

for the City of Providence

2017





About the Rhode Island Alliance for Healthy Homes (RIAAHH)

The Rhode Island Alliance for Healthy Homes (aka “the Alliance”) was established in 2014 through leadership from the Department of the Attorney General of RI, the RI Office of Energy Resources, the RI Department of Health, the RI Office of Housing and Community Development, Rhode Island Housing, the RI Department of Human Services, the City of Providence, and the Green & Healthy Homes Initiative. Now a project of HousingWorksRI at Roger Williams University, the Alliance has over 70 participating organizations and 500 individual members. The Alliance works to streamline healthy homes interventions through strategy development, communications, and activities that promote connectivity across programs and sectors. The Rhode Island Foundation and the Department of the Attorney General provided start up operating support, and Rhode Island Housing, the RI Department of Health and the City of Providence Department of Planning and Development enabled RIAHH to continue its work in 2016-2017.

Healthy Homes Strategy for the City of Providence

2017

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Executive Summary

Homes that are safe, healthy, energy-efficient and affordable can create healthy families. They can:

Reduce the number of emergency room visits and admissions for children and their families:

Asthma rates among children in Rhode Island are 40% higher than the national average,¹ yet 40% of all asthma attacks are caused by fixable environmental triggers in the home.²

Hospitalizations for asthma cost \$10,608 per child, and over \$21 million annually in Rhode Island.³

However, the cost of addressing these home triggers can be challenging for families to afford financially, when over one-third of Rhode Island homeowners spend nearly 50% of their income on mortgage and utilities.⁴

Reduce the deleterious effects of lead paint poisoning in RI children: In Rhode Island, 1 in 12 children under age 6 has lead poisoning⁵ which can cause reductions in IQ, speech and language problems, learning disabilities, and attention deficit disorder and other affects. The cost of treating lead poisoning through health home repairs and construction far outweighs the cost of prevention, on the order of billions of dollars.⁶

Improve energy efficiency and health: Young children living in homes where families can't afford winter fuel bills are 30% more likely to have hospital visits than children in similar homes with lower energy bills.⁷

Improve economic development for RI

individuals and families: Over one-third of Rhode Island homeowners are cost-burdened, spending nearly 50% of their income on mortgage and utilities.⁸ Studies have shown that cost burden is associated with higher rates of emergency room visits for asthma, mental health issues and hospitalization for high blood pressure.^{9,10}

This document outlines a healthy housing strategy for the City of Providence to ensure that residents experience the economic, health, and environmental benefits that healthy housing can provide. The City can utilize healthy housing as a concrete way to align and leverage efforts to improve public health, energy efficiency, economic development and community resilience. The benefits of a healthy housing strategy reach well beyond the individual residences where interventions take place; healthier homes mean that children and adults can lead healthier lives, are more productive members of our society, and have expanded opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the health, wealth, cultural richness and sustainability of Rhode Island.

Executive Summary

Although many Rhode Island agencies are working on healthy home issues, the efforts often lack coordination, are duplicative, and suffer unreliable funding. Furthermore, many city- and state-wide programs have trouble reaching their target audiences. In order to coordinate and build necessary services, Rhode Island needs to embrace collaborative planning, coordinated program implementation, focused policy development and enforcement, streamlined training and increased cooperation and communication among partners working to make Providence homes healthier for their residents.

The desired impact for this healthy housing strategy is that by 2021, the majority of all new and rehabilitated units created by the City will meet the National Healthy Housing Standard.

The National Healthy Housing Standard “constitutes minimum performance standards for a safe and healthy home. It provides health-based measures to fill gaps where no property maintenance policy exists, and also serves as a complement to the International Property Maintenance Code and other housing policies already in use by local and state governments and federal agencies.”

The goals of this plan are:

1 Public Policy
Make a public commitment to and build partnerships that prioritize healthy homes for Rhode Islanders—of all socio-economic profiles—in city and state public policy.

2 Support & Enforcement
Elevate the importance and alignment of healthy homes in housing regulations, building code inspections and enforcement to confer benefits to all Rhode Island communities.

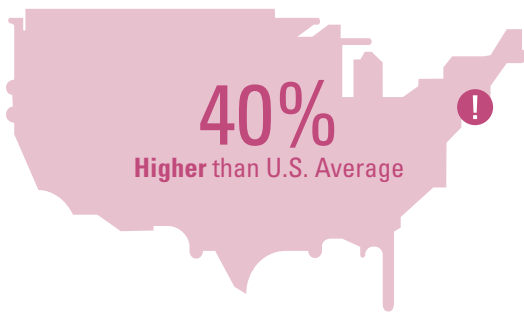
3 Training & Workforce Development
Cross-train housing professionals in healthy homes assessments, interventions and supportive resources.

Working with key partners, the City will achieve this goal through new construction, rehabilitation, finance, code, enforcement, housing court action, and resident education relating to financial and legal resources available to improve the health of their home.

This strategy was developed by the Rhode Island Alliance for Healthy Homes over the course of one year, starting in October, 2016. Through monthly meetings, quarterly retreats, and 28 one-hour individual stakeholder interviews, the Alliance obtained input from multiple perspectives on this complex issue.

I. Introduction and Current Context

Unhealthy homes can create unhealthy families and undermine community economic and sustainable development. The burden in Rhode Island:



Asthma Rates among RI Children

Asthma rates among children in Rhode Island are 40% higher than the national average,¹¹ **yet forty percent (40%) of all asthma attacks are caused by fixable environmental triggers in the home.**¹²

\$10,608 per Child

Hospitalization Cost

Hospitalizations for asthma cost \$10,608 per child in Rhode Island, and over \$21M annually.¹³



RI Children Under 6 with Lead Poisoning

1 in 12 children under age 6 in Rhode Island has lead poisoning. **Lead poisoning can cause reductions in IQ, speech and language problems, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, school absenteeism and other impacts.**¹⁴



Home Improvements for Health

Weatherization and energy upgrades, when performed correctly, can remediate asthma triggers and general risks, and reduce asthma emergency room use (**48% decline in residents with poor health; 12% decline in asthma ER visits**).¹⁵



Nearly 50% of Annual Household Income

Health & Cost Burdened RI Homeowners

Over one-third of Rhode Island homeowners are cost-burdened, spending nearly 50% of their income on mortgage and utilities.¹⁶ **Studies have shown that cost burden is associated with higher rates of emergency department visits for asthma, mental health issues and hospitalization for high blood pressure.**^{17, 18}

I. Introduction and Current Context

Nationally, 23.4 million homes are considered unhealthy.¹⁹ Billions of dollars are lost annually due to the effects of unhealthy homes – increased healthcare spending, lost work days, poor school attendance, and more. The United States’ current spending highlights the potential, unrealized opportunity from investing in healthy housing coupled with energy efficiency upgrades:

- **\$56B to treat asthma-related illness, the 7th most costly illness facing Americans.**²⁰
- **\$31B to treat trip and fall injuries among seniors.**²¹
- **10.5 million missed school days from asthma each year.**²²
- **Cost of lead hazard control: \$1.2-11 billion; benefits of prevention: \$192-\$270 billion.**²³
- **Low-income households spend triple the proportion of income on energy compared to other households (7.2% versus 2.3%).**²⁴

According to the Prevention Institute, “when housing costs are prohibitively expensive, families may be forced to relocate, often to neighborhoods with less access to resources that are essential to health: jobs, school, medical care, and social connections, as well as walkable streets, public transit, and culturally relevant goods and services”.²⁵

Even when efforts are made to improve housing at the community level, without deliberate planning for equitable investment aligned with wealth-building initiatives, there can be unintended

negative consequences, such as gentrification due to higher rents that cause displacement.

Over the past decade, state and federal agencies have realized that investing in energy efficient buildings can provide a good return on investment, in addition to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Burning fossil fuels to create electricity, heat and air conditioning in buildings is one of the largest ways individuals contribute to greenhouse gas emissions and other sources of air pollution.²⁶ According to the U.S. Green Building Council, buildings account for 39% of CO2 emissions in the United States.²⁷ Making systematic changes to how buildings are built, maintained, fixed and rehabilitated is a concrete strategy for reducing greenhouse gas and other emissions. More efficient buildings reduce emissions in addition to reducing the need for energy production at power plants. Furthermore, energy efficiency interventions have been shown to have considerable non-energy benefits, such as improved indoor air quality, reduction of environmental toxins and other triggers for respiratory illnesses such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Energy efficient building interventions are a tangible way to address climate change and promote the health and well-being of residents.

However, many existing programs are limited in their potential impact due to the presence of contaminants and toxins such as lead, asbestos, formaldehyde or radon. Sealing in such toxins can increase the health risk for residents, causing

Benefits of Safe and Healthy Homes



increases in asthma, COPD, lung cancer, and other public health problems.^{28, 29, 30} Buildings and homes that are designed with health in mind can not only promote the health of individual residents, but also strengthen communities and increase their resilience to economic, environmental and social challenges.³¹ A holistic approach to housing, one that incorporates energy efficiency and remediation of home health hazards and promotion of social justice, can realize better outcomes for residents, owners, the community, and the environment (See Figure 2).

Many opportunities exist to support health, housing and energy programs in Providence to more efficiently target high risk families and deliver critical services. While many Rhode Island agencies are working on healthy home issues, they are often uncoordinated, duplicative in their efforts, and experience uneven and/or unstable funding. Furthermore, many city- and state-wide programs have trouble reaching their target audiences.

For example:

- RI state law requires that National Grid deliver energy efficiency savings to families and individuals with low income, but the utility has trouble identifying potential applicants, often referring to this subset of the residential market as “hard to reach populations”.
- While the lead remediation programs at Rhode Island Housing and the City’s Department of Planning and Development provide interventions for families who otherwise would not be able to protect children from poisoning, the pipeline for new applicants needs to be strengthened.
- In addition, the Department of Health collects critical data regarding children at risk for, or already experiencing, lead-poisoning. The Department of Health seeks a way to work more closely with agencies offering lead interventions to help children and families reduce risk and pursue healthier lives.

I. Introduction and Current Context

There are several programs and initiatives that play a role in promoting healthy housing for all Providence residents (see below). The City of Providence has taken many recent actions that show a commitment to healthy housing.

EFFORTS RELATED TO HEALTHY HOUSING

- **Every Home Project:** A mayoral initiative to address urban blight by repurposing vacant and abandoned residential properties in the city and bringing them back into productive use.
- **Housing Opportunities Initiative:** Collective of non-profits and leaders driving a 10 year agenda to sustain affordable housing in Rhode Island
- **United Way Housing Policy Group:** Statewide policy leaders discussion on affordable housing and state housing policy
- **Legislative:** (1) Budget process to address Lead Hazard Mitigation Act (2) Taskforce on Schools & Daycares
- **Regulations:** Green Economy Bond, Affordable Housing Bond, HEZ Projects
- **Academia:** HousingWorksRI at RWU; Ellen Tohn, healthy homes strategist, now appointed to Brown School of Public Health
- **DOH:** Asthma efforts, Lead, Healthy Housing Program
- **CDBG (through HRC):** For lead training in cities and towns
- **Window Replacement Program** through Medicaid

AGENCIES DIRECTLY ADDRESSING HEALTHY HOUSING

- **State Agencies**
Rhode Island Housing
Office for Housing & Community Development
RI Department of Health
DHS (LIHEAP)
Energy Efficiency Resources Management Council (EERMC)
- **Local Agencies**
CAP Agencies
City Planning Department
Lead Centers
- **Non-Profit Agencies**
HousingWorksRI at RWU
Childhood Lead Action Project
Green & Healthy Homes Initiative
Housing Network of RI/Housing Opportunities
RI Center for Justice
Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless
New Ecology, Inc
- **Local Private Philanthropy**
United Way of Rhode Island
Rhode Island Foundation

- **The City of Providence has received multiple grants from US Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to address lead in homes, supported weatherization work through Community Action Partnerships, established a home repair program with CDBG funds, and supported the Building Homes RI bond.**
- **The City has been a pioneer in promoting collaboration across city departments and local non-profits to integrate healthy homes interventions such as lead remediation, weatherization and energy efficiency, home repair and healthy homes resident education.**
- **The Mayor's Every Home Project aims to repurpose vacant and abandoned residential properties in the city and bring them back into productive use. To date, the program has made**

policy changes in the Department of Inspections and Standards and housing court, expanded the city receivership program, and created tools for developers that are available through the Providence Redevelopment Agency.

PURPOSE OF THIS HEALTHY HOUSING STRATEGY:

*The following strategy outlines how the City of Providence can ensure residents experience the economic, health, and environmental benefits of healthy housing. The City can use healthy housing as a concrete goal to align, coordinate and leverage efforts to improve public health, energy efficiency, economic development and community resilience. The benefits of a healthy housing strategy reach well beyond the individual units where interventions take place; healthier homes mean that children and adults can lead healthier lives, are more productive members of our society, and have more opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the health, wealth, cultural richness and sustainability of Rhode Island (see **Benefits of Safe and Healthy Homes**, page 7).*

II. Definitions and Methods

A || Definition of Healthy Housing

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development defines a *healthy home* as “one that is marked not only by the absence of health and safety threats (lead, indoor allergens, radon, carbon monoxide) in the built environment, but also one that *nourishes physical, mental, social and environmental well-being*”.

HUD has outlined the following eight components as the most important drivers of safe and healthy home:

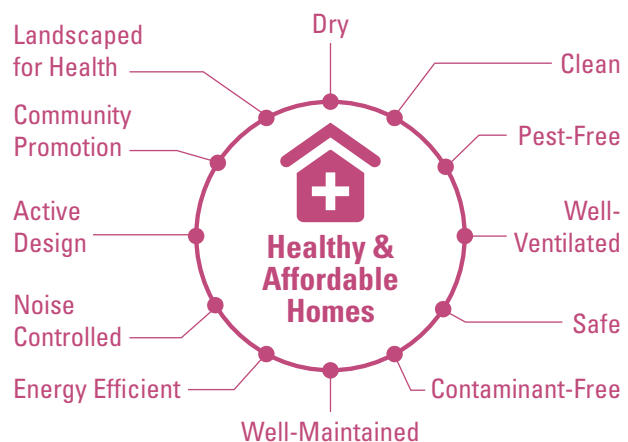
Dry • Clean • Safe • Well-ventilated • Pest-free
Contaminant-free • Well-maintained
Thermally controlled (including energy efficient)

Researchers at the Harvard Chan School of Public Health also add that healthy buildings should consider noise, lighting and views, and active design (architecture that promotes physical activity, such as choosing stairs over elevators).³² An additional two considerations are green landscaping and the role building design plays in the healthy development of communities. Robust research has shown that the landscape around a building (trees, bushes, flowers, lawns) can be designed to promote health. For example, green landscaping can reduce symptoms of

ADHD among children and promote mental health among home-bound adults and the elderly.^{34,35} Multi-family building design can contribute positively or negatively to the growth and development of social connections among residents.³⁶ Social connection can both prevent the spread of disease and reduce injury and chronic disease recovery times. It can also promote other safety conditions, such as sanitation and crime prevention.³⁷ (See Figure 3.)

Homes that are not able to maintain the above components can cause or exacerbate many public health problems including cancers, heat-related illness, high blood pressure, injuries from trip & fall hazards, lead poisoning and other childhood illnesses, legionella, mental health conditions, neurological disorders, respiratory diseases: asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and others.

Considerations for Safe and Healthy Homes



II. Definitions & Methods

B || Theory of Change

The vision that drives this plan is that *all Rhode Islanders will live in healthy, affordable, sustainable homes in thriving communities where they have chosen to live.* Our theory of change outlines a

causal pathway (see below) that will deliver our vision and ensure that healthy homes principles are reflected in the daily work of the City of Providence, and that efforts to make homes healthy are also making homes accessible to all Rhode Islanders.

Theory of Change for Healthy Housing in Providence



C || Values that Drive Healthy Housing

Based on input from RIAHH's stakeholders, the values underlying this strategy are *resilience, affordability, equity, and health*:

Resilience: ensure that healthy homes interventions are environmentally and economically sustainable and promote resilience to extreme weather events.

Affordability: make healthy homes affordable, and recognize that healthy homes can contribute to affordability and promote economic development.

Equity: protect residents from displacement associated with gentrification and confer benefits of healthy homes equitably throughout RI neighborhoods,

Health: an understanding of the full complement of determinants of health—including social determinants—will drive healthier people and healthier communities.

D || Methods

This strategy was developed by the Rhode Island Alliance for Healthy Homes over the course of one year, starting in October, 2016. Through monthly meetings, quarterly retreats, and 28 one-hour individual stakeholder interviews, the Alliance obtained input from multiple perspectives

on this complex issue. Stakeholders included members of the agencies listed in *Agencies Directly Addressing Healthy Housing* on page 8.

The consultant on the project used an assets-based approach in its data collection seeking opportunities to build on existing strengths, to frame challenges as opportunities, to build capacity, and to identify new approaches and partnerships.



III. Action Plan

A || Goals & Actions

Desired Impact: The majority of all new and rehabilitated units created by the City of Providence will meet the National Healthy Housing Standard by 2022.

The Standard, developed by the National Healthy Housing Center in partnership with the American Public Health Association, “constitutes minimum performance standards for a safe and healthy home. It provides health-based measures to fill gaps where no property maintenance policy exists and also serves as a *complement* to the International Property Maintenance Code and other housing policies already in use by local and state governments and federal agencies”.³⁸

Working with key partners, the City will achieve this goal through applying the Standard to new construction, rehab, finance, code, enforcement, housing court action, and resident education relating to financial and legal resources available to improve the health of their home.

i. Public Policy

Goal 1: The City makes a public commitment to and build or strengthen partnerships that prioritize healthy homes for Rhode Islanders—of all socio-economic profiles—in city and state public policy.

The City’s leaders should make an explicit commitment to invest in healthy homes and ensure that the benefits accrue across communities, particularly those most vulnerable to unhealthy homes and associated economic challenges. Through its operations and functions, the City should engage an equitable healthy homes approach when acting on housing quality, access to affordable housing, urban redevelopment, economic development, community development, and resiliency and adaptation to climate change.

The impact of this goal is that healthy homes’ principles will be triggered when City employees and partners engage in any work that could promote healthy homes; *promoting healthy homes will become an automatic way of doing work.*

Action Steps

1 **Make a public commitment to ensuring equitable access to healthy homes for all residents.** As mentioned above, the City of Providence already has many programs in place that relate to healthy homes. The City should review these programs using a healthy

homes framework (see Figure 3) to evaluate the interventions and their outcomes. Ultimately, these disparate programs should be coordinated and delivered as part of a comprehensive, unified healthy housing strategy. This review should include key stakeholders (see p. 15), and emphasize meaningful inclusion from more vulnerable communities. Working with the Mayor's commitment to address vacant and abandoned homes, for example, is a key way to eliminate unhealthy homes and stimulate the development of healthy ones.

2 Adopt a “Health in All Policies” approach. This approach drives collaboration across state and city agencies and is based on the recognition that the biggest challenges our communities face today—chronic illness, rapidly growing health care costs, economic stagnation, damage from severe weather—are multi-faceted and often linked. Developed by the World Health Organization and adapted to the US by the American Public Health Association (APHA), the “Health in All Policies” framework helps public agencies break down siloes and realize alignment for common challenges. By considering health in all public policies, lawmakers and public employees improve policies by considering the health, equity and sustainability impacts of their actions. The City could use an approach adopted by many other cities in the Northeast, such as Boston's Health in All Policies Task Force, which “brings together city agencies and community leaders to use health impact assessments to examine the impact of all decisions and policies on health.”

3 Establish funding for healthy homes “gaps”. Perform an analysis of all city functions that concern housing, comparing their programs and funding streams and identify gaps in services and funding. Where the lead programs and weatherization interventions fall short of supplying a full healthy home renovation for low-income residents, the City should establish a Healthy Homes Fund. These funds would be used to bring homes up to code, so that families and landlords do not get trapped in a cycle of code violations and fines with the housing courts.

4 Establish a permanent, standing Healthy Homes Task Force and continue to support the state-wide healthy homes task force, the Rhode Island Alliance for Healthy Homes. With leadership from the Director of Community Development for the Providence Department of Planning and Development, and Director of Healthy Communities for the City of Providence, draw together city employees from across departments who have responsibilities relating to or a stake in health, economic opportunity, climate resilience, and housing. Starting simply by reporting to each other how their responsibilities relate to the common goal of healthy homes, this team would seek ways to streamline and leverage their work, engage collaborations and support the City's leadership on their commitment to promote healthy housing. The City Taskforce would also align with the Rhode Island Alliance for Healthy Homes (described above). The Alliance seeks to align, braid and coordinate information, resources and services for improving the health,

III. Action & Goals

safety and energy efficiency of all Rhode Island homes. Through the Alliance, the state has offered healthy homes trainings to weatherization and building specialists, published recommendations for improving lead regulations, and supported coordination of lead and healthy homes programs at the RI Department of Health, Rhode Island Housing, and the City of Providence. Building on this groundwork of shared success, the Alliance is poised to increase collaborative efforts to promote healthy housing.

5 Sign on to support *One Touch Rhode Island*, an e-referral system for healthy homes interventions. Already funded through Rhode Island Housing and the RI Department of Health, this tool will facilitate connections between healthy homes programs such as lead hazard mitigation, weatherization and energy efficiency, and home visiting nurses and other home-based social services. In order to better connect healthy homes efforts, the Rhode Island Alliance for Healthy Homes (RIAAHH) at HousingWorks RI is bringing a powerful resource for healthy housing to Rhode Island. *One Touch™*: Creating Healthy and Energy Efficient Housing connects health, energy, and housing home visiting and repair programs to cost-effectively improve health outcomes and reduce home energy use. Government and non-profits partners that “touch” homes use a common home “check up” tool and electronic referral system to identify conditions that trigger referrals to community partners or change the services delivered. Through *One Touch*, partners assess

household health interests and housing needs in order to initiate referrals to community partners. No private health information is shared through this tool. The tool will be piloted this winter and completed in the early spring of 2018.

6 Actively support the Housing Opportunities Initiative to identify long-term solutions for affordable housing. The Housing Opportunities Initiative is a multi-stakeholder project, driven by the Housing Network of Rhode Island, that seeks to increase and preserve the supply of safe, healthy, affordable housing statewide to equitably reduce the number of housing cost burdened low and moderate-income residents by 2028. To achieve this vision, the Housing Opportunity Initiative will establish and advance strategies that 1) increase community engagement and build the political will required to catalyze and drive change, 2) lower development costs, 3) increase investment in affordable housing opportunities, and 4) make our existing housing stock more affordable to operate, maintain, and keep safe. The City should participate in the advisory group for this initiative, and seek opportunities to guide and leverage this strategic effort to promote affordable housing. The City should also work to engage community members in this effort to prevent displacement and any other negative unintended consequences.

7 Seek partnerships with medical care providers and public health programs for interventions, financial strategies and evaluations to promote healthy housing. In a recent online

publication, the Rocky Mountain Institute, a sustainability think tank, noted that most health care providers are not aware of the link between energy efficiency interventions and health outcomes. The City Task Force on Healthy Homes should consider how to alert health care officials when a healthy homes hazard is the cause of the code violation or other reason for a city employee to visit. Along with other national leaders in healthy homes, the City should recommend that health professionals think about home repairs and interventions as part of their “toolbox” for improving health outcomes for their patients. The City can support this by strengthening relationships with health care providers who treat individuals with asthma, other cardiovascular diseases, and trip and fall injuries. Where possible, the City should support health insurance reform efforts that enable providers to prescribe healthy housing by communicating to health care leadership about the importance of home-based interventions in public health outcomes.[†]

8 Seek new partnerships for interventions and evaluations with other public and private stakeholders whose work is affected by unhealthy housing. For example, there may be key educational partners who could refer children with asthma—who may be missing school due to asthma attacks—to healthy homes programs through the *One Touch* e-referral system. Such partners may also be helpful in tracking outcomes of interventions, such as sharing data about

school attendance with hospital partners who are tracking ER visits from children with asthma.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS:

- Building Inspectors
- City Commissioners Department
- City of Providence Health Program
- Community Action Partnerships
- Community Development Corporations
- Community-based Organizations
- Department of Inspections and Standards
- Department of Planning and Development
- Faith Communities
- Providence Redevelopment Agency
- Public Housing Court
- Rhode Island Alliance for Healthy Homes
- Rhode Island Department of Health
- Rhode Island Housing

KEY RESOURCES:

The collaborative efforts outlined below were current at the time of this publication.

Every Home Project

A mayoral initiative to address urban blight by repurposing vacant and abandoned residential properties in the city and bringing them back into productive use.

[†] For example, see *The Rocky Mountain Institute's infographic*: <https://rmi.org/news/health-professionals-stake-home-energy-performance/>.

III. Action & Goals

Housing Opportunities Initiative

A collective of non-profits and leaders driving a 10-year agenda to sustain affordable housing in Rhode Island.

United Way Housing Policy Group

Born from the housing bond campaign and hosted by the United Way of RI, the lead agencies and individuals working on affordable housing continue to meet monthly to review housing policy issues and seek solutions.

Legislative Opportunities

Support state legislative processes to streamline the Lead Hazard Mitigation Act, support the Taskforce on Schools & Daycares, and revise the Landlord-Tenant Act.

Implementation of New Regulations

Green Economy Bond and Affordable Housing Bond.

Academia

Academic partners exist through HousingWorks RI, the RI Center for Justice and individual faculty at Roger Williams University and the Brown University School of Public Health.

Rhode Island Department of Health

Multiple healthy homes initiatives exist at the DOH, including asthma programs, lead programs, healthy housing programs, and the Health Equity Zones.

Department of the Attorney General of Rhode Island

The Department is currently making plans for settlement funds from Volkswagen & Porsche air pollution violations.

CDBG (through the Housing Resources Commission) Funds exist for lead hazard mitigation trainings in cities and towns through the Rhode Island Housing Resources Commission.

ii. Healthy Homes Regulations Enforcement & Support

Goal 2: Elevate the importance and alignment of healthy homes in housing regulations, building code inspections and enforcement to confer benefits to all Rhode Island communities.

According to a 2017 legal review of healthy homes regulations,[†] Rhode Island has many components of its building code that, if properly inspected and enforced, would lead to the creation of healthy homes. One of the key challenges is ensuring that building code inspectors have the information they need to promote healthy homes, including which resources are available to help families afford rehab, and access social and health services to address current issues.

[†]The healthy homes regulatory review, commissioned by the RI Alliance for Healthy Homes and funded by a CDBG grant from the Providence Department of Planning and Development, is available at www.rihealthyhomes.org.

Action Steps

1 Reference the RIAHH Review of Healthy Homes Regulations when engaged with housing development and policy. The RI Alliance for Healthy Homes (RIAAHH) has recently completed a review of the current regulatory environment relating to healthy homes. The City's efforts to enforce housing code and address systematic challenges to healthy homes should heavily reference this review in order to identify opportunities to help residents improve the health of their homes.

2 Work with Housing Court judges and staff to ensure they know the latest healthy homes resources for landlords and residents. Residents and landlords can often get caught in cycles of code violations and expensive home repairs. The City should increase efforts to work with the Housing Courts to ensure that judges and staff know about existing resources for healthy homes interventions, such as lead, weatherization, home repair funds, so that when they issue violations or fines, they can also inform landlords and residents of resources they may use to address the underlying issue. The courts could also be informed about the *One Touch* e-referral resource, which may help landlords and residents connect to existing programs and funding to fix problems with their home.

3 Integrate the recommendations from the RIAHH regulatory review into City

regulations and enforcement practices to make Providence a model city for healthy homes. The following recommendations were made in the review supported by the Rhode Island Alliance for Healthy Homes (RIAAHH), with funds from the City of Providence Community Development Block Grants:

- **Continue and improve coordination among all departments, programs and funding sources that touch on healthy housing regulations.**
- **Encourage inspectors to look for all conditions that create a hazard, whether a particular hazard or condition amenable to remediation is the purpose of the inspection or not.**
- **Align forms used by housing inspectors across departments and programs where possible.**
- **Apply the strongest applicable standard if there are differing requirements or standards.**
- **Ensure that existing law is being enforced and existing resources are being used on both the medical and housing sides of the equation.**
- **Advocate for continued and additional funding, at the local, state and federal levels, to ensure appropriate regulation enforcement for healthy housing for Rhode Islanders.**
- **Encourage recipients of funding to spend all the funding they receive.**

III. Action & Goals

- **Review mold legislation from other jurisdictions and consider introducing legislation in RI.**
- **Review indoor air quality law and regulatory provisions in other states (including those related to formaldehyde and radon-resistant construction) and consider whether to implement here.**
- **Build on recent state government efforts to simplify and strengthen the state's lead laws.**

4 **Review and revise forms used by housing inspectors across departments and programs wherever possible.** Intake and intervention forms should be reviewed to ensure they include a healthy housing check list specifically, so that inspectors will be prompted to review a home for all possible hazards and conditions amenable to remediation on one visit. While mold, for example, is not mentioned specifically in Rhode Island law or regulation, the Housing Code requires homes to be clean, sanitary and fit for human occupancy and the Property Maintenance Code has several moisture-related provisions. Inspectors can use this as broad permission to cite any unsanitary or hazardous condition, including mold. Training for inspectors can include an array of healthy housing issues they should be on the lookout for.

5 **Review opportunities for healthy homes in environmental inspections with the Department of Public Works and the Department**

of Environmental Management. There are many obvious indications that a home is presenting threats to health. For example, often when a resident has put a mattress on the curb, it is because there have been bed bugs, which may indicate that there are other health hazards in the home. The City should work with DPW and DEM to bring healthy homes resources to bear when there may be other environmental hazards at the residence. The City could support the offer of regular trainings for DPW and DEM staff and ensure that inspectors have access to *One Touch RI*, the e-referral system described above. It would be useful to brainstorm key indicators of healthy homes issues from the standpoint of environmental hazards with DPW, DEM, the RI Department of Health, and the healthy homes experts involved with the RI Alliance for Healthy Homes.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

- **Department of the Attorney General**
- **Department of Public Works**
- **Department of Inspections and Standards**
- **Department of Environmental Management**
- **Department of Health**
 - **Asthma Program**
 - **Healthy Homes Program**
 - **Health Equity Institute**

KEY RESOURCES

- **RIAAH Review of Healthy Homes Regulatory Environment**
- **National Center for Healthy Housing's Curriculum on Healthy Homes**
- **Ellen Tohn, Assistant Professor of Environmental Health at Brown University, of Tohn Environmental Consultants**
- **Taino Palermo, Ph.D, teaches about housing and community development without displacement, Roger Williams University**

iii. Resident Training and Workforce Development

Goal 3: Cross-train housing professionals in healthy homes assessments, interventions and supportive resources.

Rhode Island Housing and the Office for Housing and Community Development have run a 3-day healthy homes training that could be made available to building code inspectors. Drawing on community experts such as the Childhood Lead Action Project and the Asthma Program and the Health Equity Institute at the Department of Health, cross-training opportunities ensure that code inspectors and others responsible for housing code enforcement have practical tools to promote healthy homes.

1 Train building code and real-estate inspectors to identify healthy housing threats and potential interventions. Hundreds of homes are inspected each year in Providence, including through the process of private real-estate transactions. Keeping housing code inspectors up to date on both threats to healthy housing and interventions and resources to address them would help owners and residents keep informed and take action to promote the health of their home. Working with partnerships through the RI Alliance for Healthy Homes, high-quality trainings could be made available for any city employees who inspect homes, enter residences for other city business, or work with landlords on any reconstruction or repair issues.

2 Standardize trainings on healthy homes for other key audiences. Healthy homes practitioners/advocates/educators represent a wide range of professionals: home repair contractors, energy efficiency and weatherization specialists, building code inspectors, lead abatement professionals, painters, builders, inspectors, realtors, developers, investors, home visiting nurses, other home visiting health and educational professionals, and so on. Currently, healthy homes topics are included to varying degrees—from absent to week-long—depending on the target professional group. A standard training on healthy homes for any professional who enters a home would help identify problems and link in resources before they become untenable. Through RIAHH, Rhode Island has already held such trainings, using the curriculum developed by the National Center for Healthy Housing.

III. Action & Goals

3 Enhance home-buyer programs to promote their ability to understand and invest in healthy homes repairs. While first time homebuyer programs exist, such as those offered by Rhode Island Housing, many potential homebuyers do not know about home health hazards and may need additional help before and after participating in such programs. For example, while radon inspections are part of most real estate inspections, many homeowners do not know what they should do to disburse this hazardous gas. Training in the 8 components of a safe and healthy home would better prepare them. This is also a natural opportunity to promote the free Weatherization Program for new homeowners through National Grid. In addition, some individuals and families may need assistance organizing their finances or improving their credit scores in order to even consider buying a home. Others may need help after making the decision to connect with lenders or identify ways to finance repairs and maintain healthy homes after a purchase is made. Drawing on the resources listed below, programs that educate prospective home buyers should include a review of healthy homes concepts and strategies for financing the repair and promotion of healthy homes.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

- Code Enforcement Officials
- Housing court judges and staff
- Childhood Lead Action Project
- Rhode Island Center for Justice
- Department of Health
- Department of the Attorney General of Rhode Island
- Vocational School Student Trainings for Landlords, Homebuyers and Tenants

KEY RESOURCES

- Existing Trainings with the RI Department of Health
- Center for Justice Trainings on Tenants' Rights
- CAP Agencies for Weatherization Trainings
- Rhode Island Housing Trainings on Homeownership

IV. Final Comment

The key to implementing a new strategy is to make it a part of the City's every day work. The goal of this strategy is that when any City employee or partner is working on a housing issue or a health or environmental issue that is tied to housing, that they apply the healthy homes framework and bring to bear the existing resources the City has dedicated to promoting healthy homes.

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Healthy Homes Strategy

for the City of Providence

2017

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